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# Map and Geographical Imagery in Editorial Cartoons

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Editorial cartoons are a form of social commentary combining text and imagery. Small in size, they must be worded succinctly and have recognizable images. By their nature, use, and placement – traditionally on the opinion and editorial page of a newspaper – editorial or political cartoons have a point to make, an agenda to press. Whether that message is subtle or blatant, editorial cartoons are designed to comment on and make people think about events and issues of local, regional, national, or global significance.

This study examined map and geographical imagery in selected editorial cartoons. The purpose was to identify image types, the reader's range of view relative to the cartoon, geographical locations, and whether the locations were concrete or abstract. Cartoons in this study were digitized images of editorial cartoons from the 1960s and 1970s.

## Background

Editorial and political cartoons have been a staple of newspaper and journalistic content in the United States for at least 150 years, since the end of the Civil War when the New York Evening Telegram began printing a front page cartoon each week. (Bush 1966, 11)

Editorial cartoons use text and images to communicate a message that is as subjective as any other editorial page content. In *Drawing Conclusions*, cartoonist Mike Peters said, "What I think our weapon is is our sense of humor. That's how we get someone to accept or appreciate or remember our cartoon...and then sticking the message in so they don't even see that it's medicine" (Miller 1998).

In her film, *Running Mate*, Elaine K. Miller (1993) said, "The condensed visual language of cartoons tends to rely on familiar images that already have meaning to the general public." Because cartoons are so small, the images have to readily convey concepts, issues, and controversies to the reader, and the reader needs some foreknowledge of what the cartoon is about to make sense of it.

## Imagery in Cartoons

The interpretation of visual elements in editorial cartoons is known as visual semiotics and is based in part on the 19th century work of Charles Sanders Peirce, a logician, mathematician, philosopher and scientist. Peirce organized imagery, or signs, into three types – iconic, indexical, and symbolic. An icon is a sign that resembles its object in reality (a person walking a dog drawn in a cartoon, a person walking a dog in reality). An index is associated with the object it references (short circular lines indicating the spinning motion of a tornado). A symbol has no direct connection to the object it represents except for a generally understood meaning (dove with an olive branch as a symbol of peace, an Uncle Sam character

symbolizing the United States). (Abraham 2009, 129-134)

Interpretation also requires focus on aspects of artistic creativity. One is the social content (the economy, a location, a political embarrassment). Another is the historical context. The shape of a soldier's helmet can identify imagery related to World War I versus World War II. Third are personal traits that can be exaggerated. Fourth are literary and cultural allusions that can frame social issues. A cartoon with a character labeled "Scrooge" likely conveys a message about greed and meanness, or perhaps redemption. (DeSousa & Medhurst 1982, 85-90)

## **Maps and Geographical Imagery**

Map and geographical imagery in editorial cartoons is widely varied. The longest view places the reader in space, far from the Earth. In some imagery, part of the globe is seen, sometimes with lines of latitude and longitude. A closer view may show continents with an ocean between them, a region or a state outline. Some cartoons have landform imagery (mountains and rivers) rather than maps or globes.

Analysis of imagery also has to do with whether the image conveys an actual location or an idea. A map of Louisiana may provide the location for a topic relevant to the state. A cartoon showing a butte on the horizon and a man in cowboy clothes riding a horse has a geographical setting in the American West, but the setting and cowboy culture may be metaphors. Geographical imagery can contribute to the overall meaning of the cartoon rather than fixing it in a location.

Manmade structures can also serve to identify location and context. A cartoon with the Eiffel Tower in it identifies Paris, France as the contextual location as easily as the Statue of Liberty would identify New York. A cartoon showing the Capitol dome in Washington, D.C. is likely to be about something that relates to the United States as a whole and not just the city.

## **Methodology and Data Collection**

Editorial cartoons in this study are part of the AAEC Editorial Cartoon Digital Collection in the Special Collections at The University of Southern Mississippi Libraries (AAEC: Association of American Editorial Cartoonists). The digital collection consists of 1,924 images digitized from among more than 6,500 original cartoons. The print collection has artwork by more than 300 cartoonists. Cartoons from the 1960s and 1970s make up the bulk of the collection.

A two-tiered process was designed to retrieve cartoon metadata records with map and geographical imagery, landforms, and/or manmade structures. Cartoon records containing any of the keywords Earth, map, maps, globe, or globes in the metadata were retrieved, including the work of 14 cartoonists. To retrieve records without keyword metadata, the artist's names were then searched. Cartoons were viewed and data recorded to answer five research questions (Q1-Q5):

- Q1: What map and geographical image(s) are present?
- Q2: Which of Peirce's signs can be assigned to each image?
- Q3: What is the reader's range of view?
- Q4: What geographic locations are indicated or shown?

Q5: Do the images express concrete or abstract locations in relation to the cartoon's meaning?

Data were recorded in this manner:

- Q1: Descriptive types: globes, maps, landforms, and manmade structures (if the structure indicated location).
- Q2: Peirce's trilogy of signs: iconic, indexical, or symbolic.
- Q3: Reader's range of view (arbitrary scale): extraterrestrial, global, continental, national, state, local.
- Q4: Locations indicated.
- Q5: One of three data points was recorded: (1) specific locations the same as locations at the center of the cartoon's overall meaning; (2) locations not the same as locations at the center of the meaning; and (3) cartoons with geographic imagery that did not specify a location. When more than one data point might be interpreted as correct, the point of major importance to the cartoon was selected.

Delimitations of the study included:

- Data were recorded from a maximum of 25 cartoons per cartoonist.
- Cartoons without map and geographical imagery (or with location identified only by text) were excluded.
- Cartoons with manmade structures that required labeling to be identified, or that did not readily convey a geographic location, were excluded.

## **Results and Examples**

The purpose of this study was to analyze map and geographical imagery in editorial cartoons in the AAEC Editorial Cartoon Digital Collection in the Special Collections at The University of Southern Mississippi. One hundred sixty digitized editorial cartoons drawn by fourteen cartoonists were analyzed against five research questions (Q1-Q5). Cartoonists whose work was included in this study were Paul Carmack, Eddie Germano, Jack Jurden, John Knudsen, Richard Locher, Reg Manning, Eldon Pletcher, John Riedell, Vic Runtz, William Sandeson, John Stampone, Bob Taylor, Ed Valtman, and Ben Wicks.

Q1 asked what map and geographical imagery was present, and four descriptive terms were used to record data. The research sample showed cartoons with globes (67), maps (21), geographic landforms (21) and manmade structures (59). Landforms were of six types: mountain (10 cartoons), ocean/sea (5), iceberg (3), river (1), stream (1), and desert (1). Manmade structures that indicated location included the U.S. Capitol dome (24), White House (6), Washington Monument (2), Statue of Liberty (1), United Nations building (7), Louisiana Superdome (2), Louisiana State House (3), Gateway Arch (1), Eiffel Tower (6), Houses of Parliament in London (1), Kremlin in Moscow (2), pyramids (2), mosque (1), and igloo (1).

Q2 made use of Peirce's trilogy of signs (iconic, indexical, symbolic) to identify image type. Sixty-seven cartoons had imagery that was iconic. The images had a direct relationship to the place indicated by the image, with respect to the meaning of the cartoon. For example, the presence of a map of Massachusetts in a cartoon meant

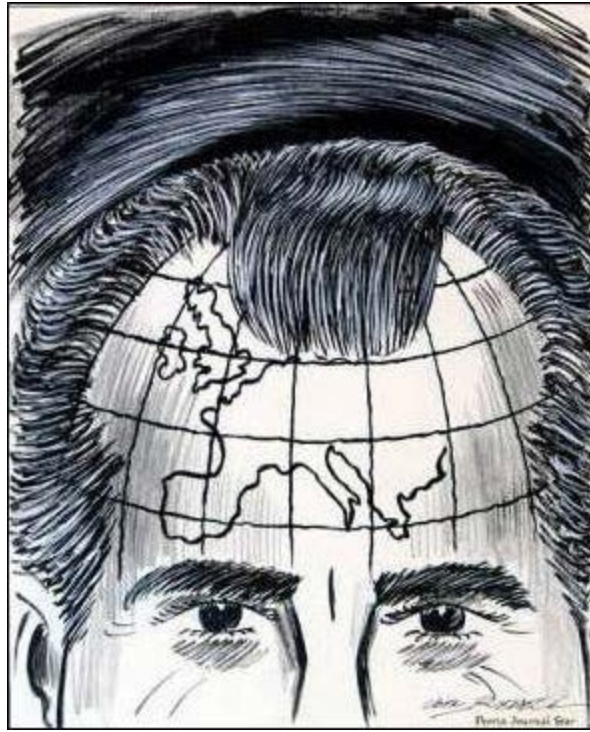
the state was the geographic focus of the cartoon's message. Ninety-eight cartoons had symbolic imagery. A cartoon showing two groups of people pushing a huge globe, one group pushing against the other, was portraying the struggle for and against change in the world. No cartoons had indexical geographical imagery.

Q3 focused on the reader's range of view and used an arbitrary set of terms to identify the reader's spatial relationship to the geographical imagery. Results were extraterrestrial (15), global (43), continental (11), national (15), state (4) and local (73). In the local range cartoons, the reader's "distance" was very close to the action of the cartoon, which usually had landform imagery or manmade structures that identified locale.

Geographic location was the subject of Q4, and 162 locations from city scale to extraterrestrial were recorded. Locations were grouped by continent and Earth/Extraterrestrial. North America, including Latin America, accounted for the most (73 cartoons), including Washington, D.C. (30), United States (21), and New York City (8). Other continents were Asia (24) including Vietnam (10), Europe (15), Africa (8), and South America (2). Earth/Extraterrestrial (40) included Earth (25) and Moon (10). Locations or regions that could not be identified with a continent were included with Earth/Extraterrestrial.

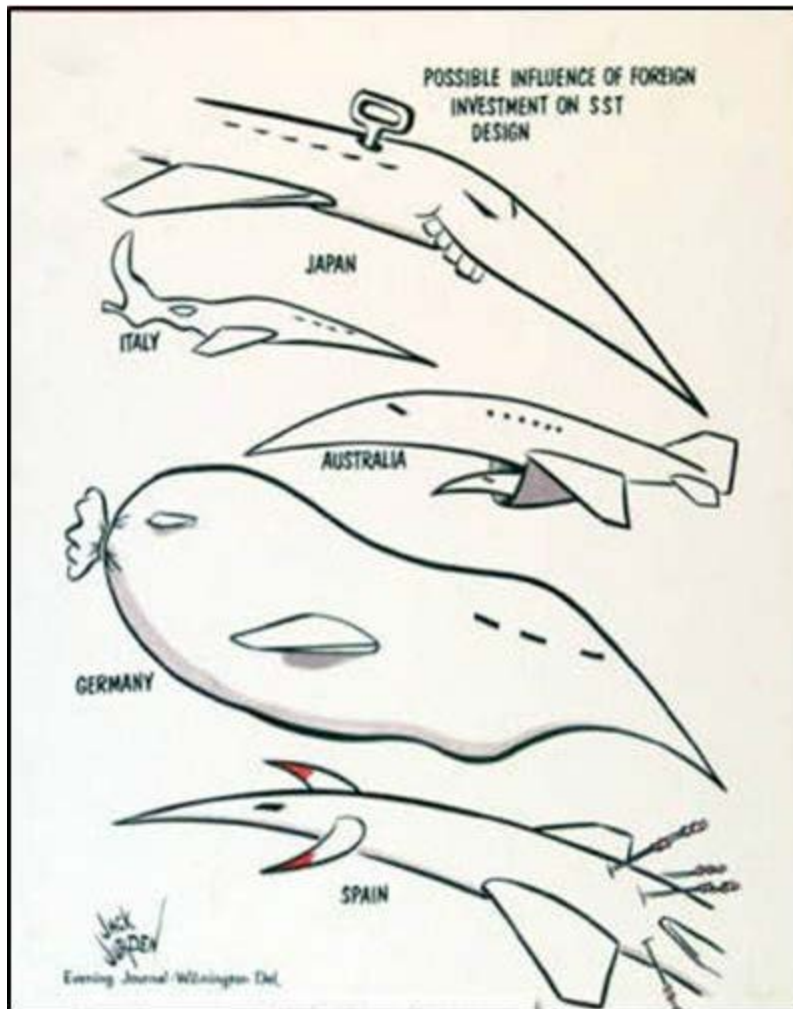
Q5 dealt with the geographic location(s) identified in Q4. In 103 cartoons, locations identified were the same as locations at the center of the cartoon's meaning. Thirty-seven cartoons had locations that were not the same as locations at the center of the cartoon's meaning. An example would be the U.S. Capitol dome (indicating Washington D.C.) in a cartoon conveying a meaning about the entire country. Twenty cartoons had geographic imagery that did not specify a location, usually landforms not tied to place (a mountain or stream).

In John Riedell's "Brow wrinkled with care" (Fig. 1), part of Richard Nixon's head and face are shown with a portion of the globe, including latitude and longitude lines, superimposed onto his forehead and scalp – round shape of a globe (Q1), but not expressing a planetary body, rather a head (Q2). The reader sees a continent (Q3), and the location shown (Q4) is Europe. Given the title of the cartoon, Mr. Nixon is apparently worried about relations with or events in Europe (Q5). Data recorded were: (Q1) descriptive type: globe; (Q2) Peirce type: symbolic; (Q3) reader's range of view: continental; (Q4) location: Europe; and (Q5) same location as overall meaning. A secondary geographic location might be inferred as the United States, but the focus was the geographical imagery, not main characters.



**Fig. 1:** "Brow wrinkled with care," by John Riedell.  
McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi

Jack Jurden's cartoon, "Possible influence of foreign investment on SST design," (Fig. 2) contains five images of how a supersonic transport plane might be designed if major funding came from Japan, Italy, Australia, Germany, and Spain. Each design contains something representative of its funding country. The Japanese design has a windup key, reminiscent of Japan's engineering and manufacturing industry. The Italian plane has a map of Italy for a tail. The map's boot shape is stylized to resemble a woman's shoe and reminds the reader of the Italian shoe industry. The Australian design reminds the reader of a kangaroo, complete with a pouch and a tiny plane in the pouch. The German design reminds the reader of a Zeppelin or a sausage. The Spanish design has a set of horns tipped in red, and the body of the plane has long barbs. This design reminds the reader of the sport of bullfighting for which Spain is known. Data recorded were: (Q1) descriptive type: map; (Q2) Peirce type: symbolic; (Q3) reader's range of view: national; (Q4) location: Italy; and (Q5) same location as overall meaning.



**Fig. 2:** "Possible influence of foreign investment on SST design," by Jack Jurden.  
McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi

Reg Manning's cartoon titled "Jingle, jangle, jingle," (Fig. 3) contains dual images. In the background is the U.S. Capitol dome. In the foreground, the leg of a very tall man is shown stepping into the cartoon. The boot has a map of Texas and "Gov. Connally" (former Texas governor John Connally) on it, and the spur jingles as the man walks. An obviously startled and much smaller second man is saying, "Omigosh! For a moment I thought it was LYNDON back again!"

John Connally was selected by Richard Nixon to be Secretary of Treasury in late 1970. The U.S. Capitol dome image is understood to mean Washington, D.C. and not just the building itself. It also fixes the primary location as Washington, D.C. The map on Connally's boot does not set a location of Texas for the cartoon in terms of overall meaning; rather it is part of the persona of Connally and former president Lyndon Johnson referenced by Manning. Data recorded were: (Q1) descriptive type: map and manmade structure; (Q2) Peirce type: symbolic; (Q3) reader's range of view: local; (Q4) location: Washington, D.C. and Texas; and (Q5) same location as overall meaning. Location Texas could be interpreted as "not the same location as overall meaning" for a second Q5 data point. In this study, only one data point was recorded for Q5.

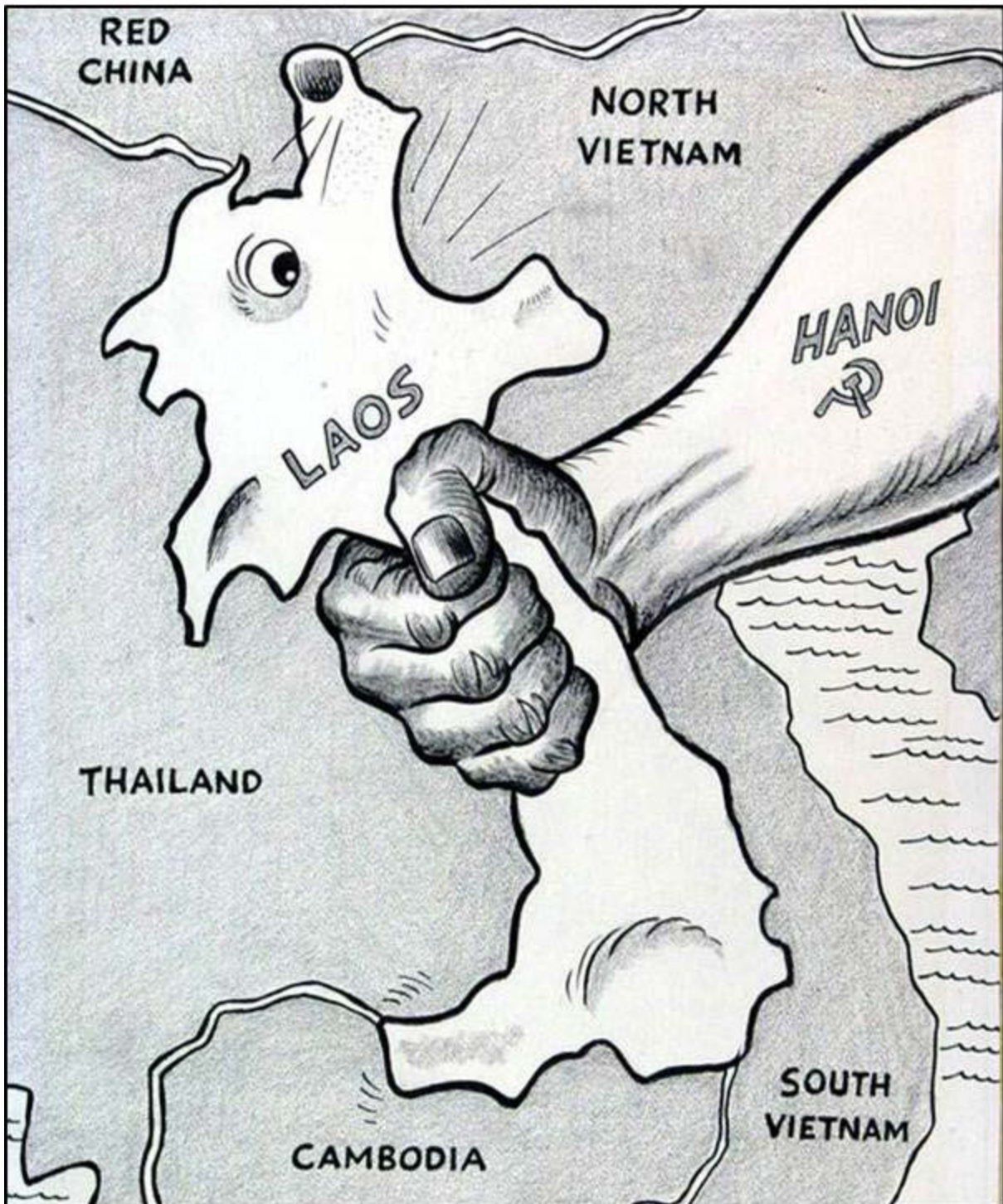




**Fig. 3:** “Jingle, jangle, jingle,” by Reg Manning.  
McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi

The last cartoon to be described (Fig. 4) was drawn by John Stampone and, lacking a title, was named “Laos and Hanoi” by collection managers at The University of Southern Mississippi. Though undated, analysis of topical content lends support to a date of 1968. A map of six Southeast Asian countries is shown, with Laos in the center. Laos resembles a small dog which is barking in alarm because it is being strangled by a strong fist. On the arm attached to the fist is “Hanoi” and the hammer and sickle symbol. Data recorded were: (Q1) descriptive type: map; (Q2) Peirce type: symbolic; (Q3) reader’s range of view: national; (Q4) location: Laos; and (Q5) same location as overall meaning.





**Fig. 4:** "Laos and Hanoi," by John Stampone.  
McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi

## Conclusion

This study analyzed map and geographical imagery in editorial cartoons in the AAEC Editorial Cartoon Digital Collection in the Special Collections at The University of Southern Mississippi. One hundred sixty cartoons drawn by fourteen cartoonists were evaluated. Two methods of identifying image type were used. In addition, the reader's "distance" from the action of the cartoon was judged. Locations indicated in the cartoons by map and geographical imagery were recorded, as well as geographic

landforms and manmade structures that indicated location. Last, geographic locations in cartoons were compared with the overall meaning of the cartoons to see if the location of the overall meaning was the same or different from that indicated in the cartoon.

Map and geographical imagery is one of the tools an editorial cartoonist uses to deliver a message to the reader. Combined with text and other imagery such as caricatures, cultural and literary allusions, lines that indicate action or motion, and drawings of people, map and geographical imagery is a vital and relevant aspect of editorial cartooning.

Other studies of imagery in editorial cartoons could focus on historical time periods, literary and cultural allusions such as symbols of holidays, or on the work of an individual cartoonist.

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